

Connors cites precedent for beach-fix charge

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— Making private property owners pay for beach repair work on their property isn't without precedent in Surf City, Mayor Leonard Connors said Wednesday.

Earlier this week, Connors announced that he was proposing that Borough Council adopt a new law that would make oceanfront homeowners pay for any sand the borough needs to dump on their property to repair the beach and the dune system.

Connors said the borough government created a similar law in the 1960s.

At that time, Connors said, Surf City contained numerous properties with low-lying land, which collected water and various pieces of debris. The borough decided to fill in the depressions and charged private property owners for the work.

"There were people that didn't like it, but we weren't going to stand by and allow the breeding of rats, there was debris from the storm of (1962) that was accumulating in these low-lying areas and water, the breeding of mosquitoes and so forth," Connors said.

Connors said the borough was legally able to charge the property owners because filling in the areas was necessary to preserve the "health, safety and welfare of the community," and that dumping sand to repair the beach would represent a similar situation.

Under Connors' proposal, property owners would only be charged for the placement of sand on their property. If the borough decided sand was needed, an oceanfront owner wouldn't be able to refuse it, but they could opt to have the sand installed privately instead of by a crew paid by the borough.

"These people will be notified that this is going to take place. They will have the opportunity to fill it themselves," Connors said.

Oceanfront properties in Surf City extend 100 feet east from their western boundary, according to Connors. However, he noted that the amount of beach in front of the house on a given piece of property varies, as people have some discretion in choosing where on the lot to build a home.

No other municipality on Long Beach Island currently has such a law, and officials with municipalities elsewhere on the southern New Jersey shore said they didn't charge property owners for dumping sand either. However, other locations, like Ocean City, have undergone beach replenishment projects, meaning the beach is wider than on much of Long Beach Island.

Connors said his proposal doesn't relate to the ongoing controversy over beach access easements required by the state and federal government before the long-awaited beach replenishment project on LBI can begin. But officials with other island towns said they would consider a law similar to the one proposed in Surf City if the LBI project is killed by enough oceanfront owners on the island refusing to sign the easements.

"The history has always been that the town has taken care of the beaches," said Harvey Cedars Mayor Jonathan Oldham.

But Oldham added that, if oceanfront owners don't sign the easements and the replenishment project doesn't move forward, "Who should pay for (beach repair) then?"

In Ship Bottom, Mayor William Huelsenbeck expressed similar feelings. He noted his borough has roughly 1,900 buildings located behind the dune system and less than 100 that qualify as oceanfront.

"I think that if the beach replenishment can take place, I think all that stuff will go away. On the other hand if people are going to be so stubborn they're not going to do it ... we have to do something to protect the people behind the dunes," Huelsenbeck said.

Long Beach Township Mayor DiAnne Gove said earlier this week she would also consider Connors' proposal. And Beach Haven Mayor Deborah Whitcraft said she "loved" the idea of making beachfront owners pay for repairs.

"I certainly can't speak for my fellow commissioners, but I definitely think that it's something we should entertain," Whitcraft said.